My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Death produces life!

If I were a rich man
The cross

by
Dr. P. Sellappan

Instrument of grace
Jesus died, but he rose from the grave. He now has a glorified and immortal body, not subject to the physical limitations of time and space (the very type of body we will inherit at our resurrection). He reigns in power and glory and all things are subject to him. God created us in his image and likeness so he could dwell in us uniquely as us. He created us so we could participate in his abundant life—in the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created us for joy, peace, freedom, adventure, creativity, passion and friendship. This has been his plan all along and nothing would distract him from achieving it.

Sin entered the world and hijacked God’s plan, albeit temporarily. Sin reduced humanity to a low quality life—to a life of shame, guilt, fear, condemnation, anxiety and sadness. That’s what sin does, and that’s why Jesus came and destroyed it.

God sent Jesus to redeem the life of our original design which was compromised because of sin. Through his life, death and resurrection he fully restored us to our original state of blameless innocence. In his death, he destroyed our sinful self, and in his resurrection, he recreated and gave us a new life. In Christ, we are a new creation.2 He has made us holy and blameless, whether we know it or not, believe it or not. That is how God sees us, what he believes about us. Our unbelief doesn’t change what he believes about us. We may as well agree with him!

Jesus assumed our humanity and entered our hell—our world of darkness, confusion and alienation—and from there he redeemed his image and likeness in us which was lost because of sin. God took our instrument of torture and transformed it to his instrument of grace. He turned our wrath to forgiveness, our beating to healing and our accusation to blameless innocence. In short, he transformed our low life to glory life, our slavery to freedom, our darkness to light. Thus the cross has become a symbol of grace, mercy, healing and restoration. That’s why millions embrace it.

That’s what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross. It’s a done deal. That’s why the cross is a resounding success. It represents victory over sin and death. It represents eternal and immortal life. All we need to do is wake up to this reality and embrace his gift of eternal life. Why wait? ❔

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Instrument of torture
Two thousand years ago, the Romans used the cross as an instrument of torture, judgement, condemnation. It was reserved for those who commit serious crimes like stirring up violence and rebelling against the establishment. The criminals were paraded, beaten, shamed, ridiculed, stripped naked and hung on a rough wooden cross to die a slow and painful death. It was meant to put fear into people so that they dared not challenge their rule.

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, died such a horrible death. He died as a criminal even though he was not. The religious authorities brought numerous charges against him including the following:
- He blasphemes God, calls God his Father, and claims to be Messiah.
- He leads people astray, tells them not to follow Moses’ law.
- He forgives sinners indiscriminately.
- He tells people not to pay tax, and is plotting to overthrow the government.
- He threatens to destroy God’s temple.
- He instigates people and causes public disorder.

They brought these charges to Pontius Pilate and demanded Jesus’ execution. Pilate knew these charges were fabricated, so he wanted to release him. But the mob shouted and demanded his execution. In order to please the mob and maintain public order, Pilate consented to their demand. He sentenced Jesus to death.

Jesus, the son of God, the Saviour of mankind, died an agonizing death at the hands of the Jews and Gentiles. These two groups represented the entire human race. Thus, like a Frankenstein monster, we killed our Maker.

Why did we kill him? We killed him because we believed in a lie about him. Jesus came to expose our lies and subvert our beliefs, and we were enraged. In our darkness, confusion and alienation, we unleashed our wrath on him and killed him.

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1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24
2 Corinthians 5:17
cover story

5 My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
The Father never forsook Jesus (or humanity).

articles

7 From grave to glory, my confrontation with the empty tomb
Jesus rose from his grave and appeared to many.

8 Love your enemies
That is God's way; he loved us when we were his enemies.

9 Our true elder brother
Jesus sees us as his brethren.

10 ‘Otherness’ and ‘likeness’
God is like us, but he is also more than us.

12 Death produces life!
We must die to live.

14 If I were a rich man
Focus on relationships, not material riches.

16 Greed
Greed kills.

18 What is reality
Object truth as God sees is true whether we believe/feel or not.

22 1,900 years of revelation
God’s revelation is progressive.

regular features

2 Editorial

4 What our readers say

19 Another angle

20 Speaking of life...

21 Tammy’s turn

23 Hmm…
Something to think about.
Dear editor, can you please explain what you mean by “Jesus came as our representative, not as our substitute?” It’s a little confusing! Thank you.

Jay

Ed: Sorry for the confusion and error. It should be rendered, “Jesus came as our representative, not just as our substitute” or “Jesus is both our substitute and representative.” The term ‘substitute’ is generally used in a forensic or legal sense. The idea is: We sinned and deserved to die because “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). But Jesus came and substituted for us. He died so that we don’t have to die. The term ‘representative’, on the other hand, is used in an all-inclusive sense. Jesus came and lived, died and rose as us. Sin blinded and hid our inclusion in Christ. Jesus came to reveal our true identity.

Seeing Jesus as merely our substitute and not also as our representative has several problems:

Adam came as a representative of the human race, and so did Jesus, the last Adam. This is quite clear from the scripture, “just as sin entered the world through one man, so death also came through one man” (Romans 5:12, 18–19). Both represented the human race. Adam brought death; Jesus brought life.

The term ‘substitute’ is usually used in a narrow sense such as paying a debt that we could not pay. The term ‘representative’, on the other hand is used in a broader, all-inclusive sense. Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and ascension represented our whole life. He didn’t come just to die for our sin. He came to live as our representative—live a perfect life that we failed to live. He acted vicariously for us as us.

If Jesus died as our substitute, then we really don’t have to worry how we lived our life because we will never die. But Jesus asks us to carry his cross, die to self, and follow him. That is, live his kind of life.

The animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were substitutes; they never really cleansed the sins of Israel. They were a type, a shadow of the real sacrifice that God would provide in the person of his son Jesus.

Even if Jesus died to settle our sin, we would still be in our sin because “if Christ is not raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Corinthians 15:17)

Many have the idea that God punished his son Jesus for our sin. That is not true at all! It is our sin that punished him. Jesus didn’t die to appease his angry Father. God the Father was never mad at us in the first place. His wrath (consuming love) is against sin that destroys us. Remember, God was with Jesus when he was dying on the cross. He was in Christ reconciling the whole world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The terms ‘justice’ and ‘judgement’ in scripture refer more to restoration than retribution. Jesus came to restore us to the life of our original design, not to punish or condemn us.

God has the power to forgive our sins without requiring his son’s blood. Christ shed his blood not to appease an angry Father, but to cleanse our guilty conscience (Hebrews 9:14).

The term ‘substitute’ is law-based whereas the term ‘representative’ is grace-based. God doesn’t react to our sin like we do! His original purpose was to create humans in his image and likeness so he could come and dwell in them permanently and uniquely as them. Whether humanity sinned or not, Jesus would still come and take up residence inside us.

Sorry for the lengthy response for a short question! But we hope it clarifies the difference between ‘substitute’ and ‘representative’. Even if it doesn’t, don’t worry, your salvation is totally intact in Christ!

Hello, I like your magazine very much and I think the articles are honest and come from the heart. I have made a small donation as a token of my appreciation. If you can put me on your mailing list, it will be greatly appreciated. Please keep up the good work and pass on the message of the Gospel to as many people as you can through your magazine! Best wishes.

Prabhaharan Rajendra

I am a subscriber to your Plain Truth magazine and I would like to thank your team for the wonderful work you are doing in sharing God’s word, the Good News. Just to inform you, I have deposited RM100 into the Plain Truth account. God bless your work.

Jun Chen

Ed: Thank you all for your generous gifts. Your participation in this ministry is greatly appreciated. You never know how many people you are impacting with your gift!

The Plain Truth is informative, thought-provoking and engages the inner man. It provides encouragement, enlightenment, hope, faith and love from God and thus alleviates our suffering caused by greed, hatred and illusion.

Francis Goh Beng Sai

Kuching
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It was one of the defining moments in all of history. Jesus crucified.

During those approximately six hours that he hung on the cross, many memorable events took place. Not least when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jesus always spoke of God as his Father. Even when he talks to the disciples about God he refers to him as your father or my father. Each time Jesus prays he addresses God as his father. Never does he address God as ‘my God.’ This was a major source of conflict between the Jewish Rabbis, leaders and Jesus. The Jews never referred to God on such personal terms as ‘Father.’

When Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, with tears and sweat drops of blood, he repeatedly called God ‘Father.’ Even at the age of 12, when his parents find him in the temple, he refers to God as his father. It therefore makes sense that during his most trying moments, such as when praying in Gethsemane and on the cross, he would talk to God in terms of ‘Father.’ An obvious question would then be why would Jesus, while hanging on the cross, call out, “My God, my God” and not “My Father, my Father?”

Jesus never uses words randomly, so it was not by chance that he said God and not Father.

Taking on the sins of the world

A common belief is that at the exact moment Jesus called out these words was the moment that he took on all the sins of the world and that God the Father turned his back on him. Even with that scenario, the question still remains as to why would Jesus not say, “My Father?”

Looking at Jesus’ relationship with God as father it is even more pertinent that that would be the one time Jesus would cry out, “My Father.” Even after this incident Jesus still addresses God as father when he says, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,” and having said this, he gave up the ghost.

Two things stand out here. Firstly, why now address God as ‘Father’ and secondly, at this point Jesus would still be carrying all the sins of the world. So if God had turned his back on him, how could he commend his spirit into God’s hands?

The gospel writers only mention that when Jesus cried out, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” that some of those who stood by, when they heard it, said, ‘behold, he calls Elijah.’ Those that heard him either did not speak Aramaic, or did not hear clearly what he said. However, at some stage those standing around (or those who later heard of the incident) would have definitely thought of Psalm 22. Why? Because Jesus’ words were a direct quote from the first verse of Psalm 22. This was no coincidence. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing and saying. Therefore, in a genuine attempt to find out exactly what was behind Jesus’ words, it would be helpful to study the whole of Psalm 22.

The Psalm of the cross

It is quite apparent why Psalm 22 is often referred to as the Psalm of the Cross. There is no mistaking who David is talking about nearly 1,000 years before Jesus’ crucifixion.

“They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: My heart is like wax; it is melted within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”

David is obviously not talking here about himself. Reading Psalm 22 a person can get confused at times as to exactly whom David is referring to. Sometimes it sounds like he is talking about himself. Then in the next breath he is prophesying about Jesus and then talking to us, or the nation of Israel. In fact, often the words do not even appear to be those of David, but Jesus’ or God’s own.

On the cross Jesus was pointing everyone to the fact that Psalm 22 is referring primarily to him. This in itself is beautiful and amazing, but there is more. A central theme of the Psalm is about asking God why does he ‘appear’ to forsake us in our times of dire need.

We have to understand that because the Psalmist says, “My God why have you forsaken me?” does not automatically mean that God has forsaken him. It is clear from verse 24 that God “has not despised nor disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; Neither has he hid his face from him; But when he cried unto him, he heard.” There are times in our lives that we feel as if God has forsaken us and we might even cry out in desperation, ‘God, I am going through terrible trials and my prayers are not being answered. Why my God, have you forsaken me?’ And God lovingly answers, ‘No my child. I have not forsaken you. For I have promised that I will never leave you, nor forsake you.’

The Amplified Bible, which is a literal translation, puts it this way, "for He [God] Himself has said, I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. [I will] not, [I will] not, [I will] not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let [you] down (relax My hold on you)! [Assuredly not!]."

If you are still not convinced carry on reading through Psalm 22 and 23. The two Psalms are so harmonious in their message that it is no wonder they were placed next to each other.

My God why have you forsaken me?

He has not hid his face from him [me].

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Yes, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.
Did God really turn away from Jesus?
This should cause us to pause and consider that maybe God did not turn his back on Jesus, nor forsake him. That was not what Jesus was saying, but in fact he was saying the exact opposite. It could give us the wrong idea about who God the Father really is. If God the Father forsook Jesus, his one and only begotten Son and Jesus is himself fully God and part of the Trinity, then what chance do we have?

Central to the argument of God having forsaken Jesus is that Jesus had taken on all the sins of the world and that God cannot be in the presence of sin. But then how come, after Adam and Eve had sinned, did God come and speak face to face to them?

There is also the story in the book of Job where Satan (the chief of all sinners) comes into the presence of God in heaven. Another thought is if God, who is omnipresent and ‘holds the universe in the palm of his hand’ cannot be in the presence of sin, where can he go? He is everywhere.

Jesus (who was fully God while on earth) regularly ate and mingled with sinners. We humans are tainted by sin, and when we rub shoulders with it, it sticks to us and doesn’t wash off. Not so with God the Father or Jesus.

Does this mean that God is okay with sin? Of course not. As the old cliché goes, God hates sin but loves the sinner. An amazing part of the Gospel is that God, who is perfect, undefiled and sinless, was willing to come and sit in the dirt with us. But he did not leave us there, he took off his clean coat and put it on us and we became sinless. God is not scared to get his hands dirty.

In our moments of greatest need and in the depths of sin, God is always there. When God says, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’—he means it. He has not despised our sufferings nor hid his face from us.

Praise our loving Father for that.

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4 Luke 2:46–49
5 Luke 23:46
6 Mark 15:34–35
7 Psalms 22:13–18
8 Deuteronomy 31:8, Joshua 1:5, Hebrews 13:5
9 Psalms 22:1
10 Psalms 22:24
11 Psalms 23:1
12 Psalms 23:4
From grave to glory, my confrontation with the empty tomb

What makes Jesus so special? That's a question that many ask in our society. Perhaps it is something that we have all asked from time to time. Was he just a good, moral teacher, or was he something else? Those of us who are 'churched' may think the uniqueness of Jesus is a moot point. I used to think that way myself, until I faced the other side of this argument. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a discussion on Jesus at Regent College in Vancouver. On this particular Saturday, Marcus Borg and N. T. Wright debated the merits of the arguments for Jesus' divinity.

Marcus Borg is a professor of religion at a university in Oregon, a participant of the famous Jesus Seminar which meets on a regular basis to determine whether or not various statements in the Gospels attributed to Jesus are in fact his words. Dr. Borg does not believe that Jesus was in fact both divine and human, instead he believes Jesus was a great moral teacher.

Dr. Wright is a professor at Oxford and also an evangelical. He, on the other hand, believes the Bible's claims that Jesus was indeed both God and man.

As the civil but lively debate continued through the day, I was amazed at the ability of both scholars to present their particular positions in a logical and articulate way. Reflecting back on that day, I can't help but wonder if similar debates have raged since that early Sunday morning almost two millennia ago when the women found the empty tomb.

Sometimes I think that even we too, as Christians who have a high view of scripture, can take a similar view as Dr. Borg. Sure we know that Jesus is God and that he was resurrected, but there are times when we see him go to the cross and unfortunately leave him there, or go a little further and leave him in the grave.

We can reflect at this time of year on all the terrible things we have done that caused him to die. That is why when I think of the many Lord's Supper ceremonies I experienced over the years, I think of attending a funeral.

In their song, “World’s Apart” the Christian Alternative Group, Jars of Clay, express the feeling this way:

I am the only one to blame for this
Somehow it all adds up the same
Soaring on the wings of selfish pride
I flew too high and like Icarus I collide
With a world I try so hard to leave behind
To rid myself of all but love to give and die
To turn away and not become

Another nail to pierce the skin of
one who loves more deeply than the oceans,
more abundant than the tear
Of a world embracing every heartache
Can I be the one to sacrifice
Or grip the spear and watch the blood and water flow.

Oftentimes we ‘examined ourselves in order to find ourselves worthy’ to partake of the bread and wine which represent Jesus’ body shed for us. The whole mood of the experience was one of shame, guilt and worthlessness. Some were overcome with so much guilt that they refused to take part in the symbols. Many of us then proceeded to live the next seven days attempting to live de-leavened lives by “putting sin out” only to be reminded on a daily basis of our inability to live perfect lives.

Sometimes we would look at our lives and see the forces of evil win over the forces of good, when every friend and disciple fled in fear, when the Son of God died on a cross—when God seems most absent, he may be closest of all; when God looks most powerless, he may be most powerful; when God looks most dead, he may be coming back to life. They learned never to count God out.

Campolo's sermon skips one day, though. The other two days, Good Friday and Easter Sunday, are perhaps the most significant days on the entire church calendar, and yet, in a real sense, we live our lives on Saturday, the day in between. Can we trust that God can make something holy and beautiful and good out of a world which includes war-torn countries and inner-city ghettos in the richest nation on earth?

continued on page 9
Love your enemies

When my neighbor threw a dead rat over his fence into my yard, I was tempted to toss it back into his yard. That would have been appropriate, wouldn’t it?

Included in the instruction the Lord gave to ancient Israel was the law requiring equal restitution for crimes committed against a person—an “eye for an eye.”1 This principle has a certain appeal—it sounds “fair.” Our normal reaction when insulted is to insult back, to retaliate. Children, especially siblings demonstrate this response all too well. “He hit me, so I hit him back.”

Wait a minute! Jesus gave a new teaching for Christians—to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, and to pray for those who despitefully use or persecute us.2 That can be hard to do. Is it even possible?

Jesus’ example
Jesus doesn’t tell us to do something he didn’t do himself. Dying an agonizing death he said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”3 Notice—he asked for their forgiveness as they were murdering him. He didn’t struggle to work up a forgiving attitude. It was (and still is) his nature to forgive: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”4

Other examples
Stephen, described as a man full of God’s power, gave a dynamic speech pointing out the sins of the Jews who had consented to Jesus’ death. Their response was to stone him to death. As he was dying he echoed Jesus’ words, crying out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”5 The next verse reads, “And Saul was there, giving approval to his death.”6 No doubt many, perhaps including Saul, could not help but be affected by Stephen’s expression of forgiveness.

Later Saul was converted and renamed Paul. As an apostle he was severely beaten, imprisoned, and stoned by Stephen’s expression of forgiveness. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”

Loving our enemies
Perhaps you don’t have any enemies as we usually think of enemies. Extreme cases are rare. However, at times we face irritating neighbors, aggressive drivers, insults, negative remarks, or people who take advantage of us in hurtful ways. We then have the opportunity to respond in Christian ways.

It helps to remember Jesus’ example. He died for you and me while we were still sinners.8 We can learn to look on others as he views them—not as wicked sinners, but as potential sons of God, future spiritual brothers and sisters. We too can emulate Jesus who recognized that those who were mistreating him did not comprehend the seriousness of their actions.

Overcome evil with good
“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ’It is mine to avenge, I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary: ’If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’”9

Aha! There it is! I can be nice to my enemies and coals of fire will scorch their heads! No, this verse needs some explanation. It is quoted from Proverbs 25:22. The New Living Translation reads “burning coals of shame”. Solomon and Paul were pointing out that showing love to those who mistreat us will normally make them feel ashamed and reconsider their actions. Paul concluded by saying, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”10 Our Christian response should always be to show love.

Even if some of us face life-threatening persecution from enemies we can be assured they will not gain the ultimate victory. Our Lord has already won the victory over all enemies, including death.

One caution
God does not expect us to willingly face abuse or criminal activity. God’s laws and our God-ordained national laws protect us from violent crime and require punishment for criminals. At times Jesus took action to avoid being harmed.11 Self-defense may be appropriate if we face physical abuse.

When Jesus tells us to “turn the other cheek”12 he was not implying we should allow ourselves to be mistreated or put ourselves in danger. Instead he was saying don’t respond in kind, don’t retaliate. By the way, the eye for an eye principle was figurative, not intended to be literal, but a statement that punishment should suit the crime.

We all offend others
Let’s remember—Jesus forgives us when we offend others, and we do offend others, even in ways we do not recognize. “For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.”13 We aren’t perfect, yet God forgives you and me. Likewise, let’s forgive those who offend us. Those who trouble us may later become our brothers and sisters.

Finally, let’s remember, Jesus will eventually right all wrongs.

In case you are wondering—it was hard for me to resist, but I didn’t throw the dead rat back into my neighbor’s yard. A little voice in my head reminded me, “Love your enemies.”

1 Leviticus 24:17–21
2 Matthew 5:44
3 Luke 23:34
4 1 Peter 2:23
5 Acts 7:60
6 Acts 8:1
7 1 Corinthians 4:12, 13
8 Romans 5:8
9 Romans 12:17–20
10 Romans 12:21
12 Luke 6:29
13 James 3:2
Human history grinds on, between the time of promise and fulfilment. It’s Saturday on planet Earth; will Sunday ever come?

Perhaps that is why the authors of the Gospels devoted so much more space to Jesus’ last week than to the several weeks when he was making resurrection appearances. They knew that the history to follow would often resemble Saturday, the in between day, more than Sunday, the day of rejoicing. It is a good thing to remember that in the cosmic drama, we live out our days on Saturday, the day with no name.

Maybe this is where many of us find ourselves, in the time previous to the empty tomb. Certainly, we are all responsible for the death of the Saviour. Yet, by his resurrection, something was proven to us—his power over death and his divinity. Yes, our sin put the nails in his hands, but his death allowed him to reach out to all who are responsible for his death and lift them beyond the shame and guilt of that same sin.

The empty tomb showed that God is the author of great reversals. Only God could make: a death produce life; slavery become freedom; or our sinful activity become mercy and grace.

The resurrection of Jesus is about all those things.

T he parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15:11–31 is arguably one of the most famous and well-loved parables of Jesus. It is one of the clearest and most moving visions of God’s grace and forgiveness, in which Jesus presents us with a picture of the Father longing to be reconciled to those who have rejected him.

It has often been said of this parable that it is an example of forgiveness without atonement or cost. Some claim that Jesus clearly teaches that the younger son wanted to make restitution but the Father did not let him. Instead, they argue, the Father forgives his son without any kind of price being paid.

Cost of restoration
To claim this, however, is to misunderstand the parable. What is often missed is that in order for the younger son to be restored someone else had to bear the cost. The forgiveness of the younger son would indeed come at a price because being restored to a full relationship with the Father would mean that he would again be entitled to a share in the Father’s remaining estate. It would, therefore, fall to the lot of the older son to pay the price of his younger brother’s restoration as he would receive much less inheritance as a result. Indeed, one of the reasons the elder brother must have begrudged the younger coming back was because his brother’s return would come at great cost to himself.

The older brother in this parable begrudged the Father’s grace and didn’t want to pay the cost of restoration. We, however, have an altogether different type of elder brother.

The image of Christ as our elder brother is seen both in the writing of the Apostle Paul, who calls Jesus the firstborn among many brothers,¹ and in the letter to the Hebrews, in which the author says that Jesus had to be made like his brothers in every way in order to save them.²

Jesus’ attitude towards his brothers was entirely different to that of the older brother in Luke 15. He makes it clear that he was not a reluctant participant in the grace of the Father but rather he laid down his life willingly in order to pay the penalty for our sins:

“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”³

We have the true elder brother who bore the cost of our forgiveness through his death on the cross. He paid the price that we could not pay in order that we would be reconciled to the Father. 1 Peter 2:23–25 says:

‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree… For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.’

In Jesus, the Father comes out to those who have rejected God and pays the ultimate price in order that their sins will not be counted against them and they can know the unconditional love of the Father:

“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”⁴

So let’s thank God that we have such an elder brother who, unlike the older son of the parable, did not begrudge the grace of the Father but was willing to pay the price for us to be restored to the family of God.

1 Romans 8:29
2 Hebrews 2:14–18
3 John 10:17–18
4 2 Corinthians 5:19

by
Hannah Robinson

Our true elder brother
‘Otherness’ can be frightening and dangerous for it represents the unknown. We want enough ‘otherness’ to intrigue us, but not too much so as to scare us. ‘Otherness’ has the potential to harm us. ‘Likeness’ can be frightening and dangerous too, for it represents the disintegration of differentiation (boundaries). We want enough ‘likeness’ to be comfortably familiar, but not too much ‘likeness’ so as to lose our sense of uniqueness. Equality has the potential to eliminate us.

Despite these potential dangers, love is only possible when both ‘likeness’ and ‘otherness’ is present. God is the most surprisingly beautiful encounter with ‘otherness’ and ‘likeness’ one can ever have.

Misunderstanding of God’s ‘otherness’ and God’s ‘likeness’ leads to a lack of intimacy, so let’s look at some of these misunderstandings.

Negative ‘Otherness’
The ‘otherness’ of God can be emphasized to the extent that He becomes utterly unknowable, unpredictable and unapproachable. Transcendence is the word most often used in theology... and it’s a beautiful word if correctly understood.

A wrong understanding of God’s otherness looks like this: God is beyond anything we can imagine, beyond the time and space in which we exist, beyond the capacity of our finite minds to comprehend. The result is that this god becomes more alien than anything we have ever imagined. Whatever we think we know of him is simply a shadow in which He condescends to our level... but who he really is will never be known. Intimate knowledge of this god is impossible. For this god to involve himself with us is unthinkable; for this god to be in any way affected by us, would be to reduce his divinity.

This is the kind of ‘otherness’ in which there is no place for ‘likeness’, an ‘otherness’ that can only be feared, not loved.

‘Otherness’ as revealed by Jesus
Now there is undoubtedly something very surprising, something very ‘other’ about the God revealed in Jesus. He is beyond what we have ever imagined, but at the same time He is the God who delights in revealing Himself, not in withdrawing into utter unknowability.

How can God remain ‘other’ yet reveal Himself? Well there is so much to be revealed! He is not unknown because He hides Himself, but because the revelation of who He is will never be exhausted. In Jesus, the most essential quality of God is revealed: God is love and what we do not know about Him yet does not nullify what we know about Him.

In Jesus God did not simply condescend to our level, He fully committed Himself to our existence in becoming human. This form of existence deeply affected Him... in every way. Jesus demonstrated that God is involved and affected by humanity; He suffers with humanity... even dies our death with us. This God is more present than what we are aware of. Jesus surprises us with a God who is more like us than what we ever imagined; a God who defines Himself as God-with-us. He will never again be God-without-us.

Yet He never becomes ordinary. He remains ‘other’ in that He continues to overwhelm us with the love He has for us. Encountering God remains an astonishing event, no matter how often we have experienced it.

In the context of relationship, God has always been and will always be unexpected, astonishing, exciting, surprisingly ‘Other’. The only thing about God that is predictable is love, but even His love finds expression in the most unusual ways.

Whenever God becomes boringly predictable, you are busy with your own finite ideas about God, not with God Himself. We will never capture God with our intellect. This does not mean that God is anti-intellect. In fact, when Jesus was asked what the greatest command is, his answer was: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”

Loving God is something we can do not only with our hearts, but also with our minds. However, no matter how you try to astonish your intellectual discoveries are, God remains bigger than your understanding of Him.

Similarly, God remains bigger than your feelings and experiences. This also does not mean that God is anti-feelings. But rather, no matter how intense your experiences of Him has been, there remains more to be experienced and surprised by.

In summary, God’s ‘Otherness’ is not dangerous and therefore not to be feared, for what we know beyond doubt is that God is love. His ‘Otherness’ is the exciting infinite possibilities to be surprised by a God who is better than what we’ve ever imagined. His ‘Otherness’ means we can never get bored with Him!

Jesus also reveals the ‘Otherness’ in man... more about that some other time.

Negative ‘Likeness’
Our likeness to God and God’s likeness to us can be emphasized to the extent that no distinction remains. In discovering the glorious joy of union with God, some have unwittingly described it in terms that actually reduced this union rather than valuing it for what it is. Union is not one-and-the-same. Union presupposes distinct parts. One-and-the-same leaves no opportunity for fellowship, for love does not exist in singularity.

If your idea of union with God leaves no room for distinction between you and God, you will become so familiar with God that you will soon be bored of ‘him’ and replace ‘him’ with yourself.

The ‘Likeness’ of God revealed in Jesus
Beloved of the Father. It is only in knowing the Sonship of Jesus, that we come to discover our inclusion in that Sonship.

The Spirit, Whom Jesus asks the Father to send, and Whom the Father sends, is not any spirit. She is the Spirit that proceeds from the Father of this Son.

Union and Distinction

Jesus reveals that God is a dynamic relationship of love. God is Father, Son and Spirit and has always existed in this form. It is in this relationship of union, of these distinct persons, that God is One. God is One, not One-and-the-same, but rather, One-and-distinct.

Jesus reveals the God of love... but love cannot exist in isolation. If God was One-and-the-same, a singularity, then He could not be love. Distinction is what makes love possible. The Father, Son and Spirit fully partake in one another's beings, yet they are not dissolved into a monotheistic God, their tri-identity remains.

Love within God

Love is the one essential quality that makes God, God. To love is God's freedom. To love is God's justice. To love in new and surprising ways, is God's creativity.

This is why you are here! The love within the Godhead is the love of 'like' for 'like' within Himself. In God's freedom, He wanted to extend this love to 'likeness' within another. "And Elohim said: Let us make man in our image and likeness".

In creation, God expressed Himself beyond Himself. So although creation is intimately upheld and sustained by Him, it is 'other' from Him. Creation and the Creator are not one and the same. Creation is distinct for the Creator. This does not mean that He is removed, uninvolved or not present in creation. On the contrary, Jesus reveals a God Who is here, Who is more intimately involved than what we ever imagined, more present than what we are aware of. Yet, He remains distinct... and it is this very distinction that makes romance possible.

In creation and specifically in man, the love of God finds opportunity to flow beyond the Godhead. It has freedom to be expressed to another... even towards the extreme 'other': towards enemies.

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In creation and specifically in man, the love of God finds opportunity to flow beyond the Godhead. It has freedom to be expressed to another... even towards the extreme ‘other’: towards enemies.
Death and life are part of nature. For example, leaves die and new leaves appear. Seeds die producing new seeds. Cells wear off and new ones surface. Stars burn out and new ones appear. This is how the physical world operates. In some mysterious way, death produces life. It’s a paradox. That is also true of human lives.

**Jesus died to give us life**

In ancient times, people offered animal sacrifices to their gods as payment for their sins so that their lives would be spared. The animals died so they could live. One died so that another might live.

The Old Testament prophets prophesied the coming of a Saviour who would offer himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. His single death would blot out their sins once and for all. That prophecy was fulfilled 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ came to this world, lived a sinless life, and died and offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. His one sacrifice would replace all sacrifices forever.

How is it possible for one person’s death—Jesus’ death—pay for the sins of all people?

God created all things—including the human race—through his son Jesus. As Creator, he sustains all things by the power of his might. All humanity is inextricably bound up in him. Nothing exists outside of him. We exist only in him. We live, move and have our being in him. Jesus came as God incarnate, as God in the flesh, as God-Man. He is fully God and fully human, both divine and human, having two natures in his one person. Only a God-Man can mediate between God and humanity. That is why he is called the Mediator.

Just as the first Adam represented all humanity, the last Adam, Jesus, also represented all humanity. While he was a particular individual, he also represented all people. As our representative, he took our sin into himself and died on the cross. He died as us. We were baptized into his death. That is, we died with him in his death, we co-died. That’s why the scripture declares “when he died, we died” even though it is surreal because we are still alive! But that is the objective truth—as God sees us in the spiritual realm. He sees us dead in Christ’s death even if we are still alive in the physical realm!

Jesus’ death, and our death in his death, is only part of the story. He rose from the grave and ascended to heaven, where he is seated face-to-face with God the Father. He is the first human being ever to step into heaven. He is also the first human being who is holy and blameless and seated at the right hand of God. While Jesus is a particular individual, he also represents all people. That’s why the scripture says “when he rose and ascended, we rose and ascended” even though it is surreal to us! But that’s the truth—as God sees us in the spiritual realm. He sees us as a brand new creation, in Christ’s risen life. That’s why the scripture declares that we are co-seated with Christ in the heavenly places.

Because all humanity is inseparably bound up in Christ, whatever happened to him also happened to humanity. Thus, when he died, we died; when he rose and ascended, we rose and ascended. He died and rose and ascended for all humanity. He is our vicarious humanity. He was living and acting with us and as us. As God incarnate, as God-Man, he has united God and man eternally. So there is no separation whatsoever between God and man (even if religion teaches otherwise).

That’s why salvation doesn’t depend upon us at all. It doesn’t depend on our repentance and sinner’s prayer. It doesn’t depend on our baptism, law-keeping, overcoming sins, good works or even our faith (which are all good). Salvation is entirely the work of Jesus from start to finish. We have no part in it whatsoever because none of us can make ourselves holy and blameless. That is why we receive it only by grace. It’s a gift that we receive from God with much thanksgiving just like little children who receive gifts from their parents.

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**by Dr. P. Sellappan**

Death produces life!
If we can earn salvation by our own effort—by our repentance, baptism, obedience, good works and faith, then it is no longer grace. It implies that we have the power to control our own salvation and are more powerful than God, which is obviously not true.

**How do we view death?**

Many fear death because it reduces them to dust and ashes. All their accomplishments, fame, power, influence and riches come to nothing. They also worry if they will end up in heaven, hell, or somewhere in-between. Those who believe in reincarnation (not to be confused with incarnation) worry about their next life—whether their present life will take them to a higher quality life like being born into a rich family, or to a lower quality life like being born as a cat or a dog.

Man’s greatest enemy is death and we are absolutely helpless to do anything about it. That’s why Jesus came and conquered death for us. He died to take away our old sinful self and rose to give us a brand new life. That’s a done deal. So we don’t have to worry too much about our death because we have already passed from death to life. It is far better for us to focus on living our new life in Christ. God wants us to live joyful, fruitful and satisfying lives. And to empower us to live that life, he has freely given us his Holy Spirit. As the Holy Spirit leads us, we get to experience the God-life—here and now and forever in his kingdom.

As Martha was weeping over Lazarus’ (her brother’s) death, Jesus declared to her “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?” To prove his power over death, he raised Lazarus from his grave. What Jesus did was only a shadow of the permanent resurrection he would give to all who believe in him. After his death and resurrection, he declared to Apostle John, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” That is also our destiny.

**Let’s summarize:** Jesus, representing all humanity, assumed our sinful nature and died on the cross. We co-died with him. When he rose, we co-rose with him. In this act, he recreated us and seated us with him in the heavenly places. He is our life; we are mystically hidden in him. That includes not just believers, but all people whether they know it or not, or believe it or not. God loves all people and wants everyone in his kingdom. He has already forgiven, reconciled, accepted and adopted us as his children. We are his children now and will always be. Awakening to this truth and living it produces the abundant life that he offers us. That’s why Apostle Paul was not afraid of death because he was fully persuaded that he was secure in the risen Christ.

Let’s live our new life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Why live the old, dead and non-existent life that was crucified on the cross with Christ? Why not live the Zoe or God kind of life—the thrilling, adventurous, joyful, creative and satisfying life? That is the life God is offering to us. That’s really good news and we can all say Amen to that.

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1. Colossians 1:16–17
2. Acts 17:28
3. 1 Timothy 2:5
4. Romans 6:3–4
5. 2 Corinthians 5:14
6. 1 Corinthians 15:20–22
7. Ephesians 2:6
8. Ephesians 2:8
9. 1 Corinthians 15:26
10. 1 Corinthians 15:53–55
11. 1 John 3:14
12. John 11:25–26
13. Revelation 1:18
14. Mark 12:27
15. John 11:11, 1 Corinthians 15:20, 1 Thessalonians 4:14
17. Philippians 1:21–24
18. Revelation 21:5
For those who have had the pleasure of watching the movie 'Fiddler on the Roof,' one of the most endearing and catchy songs to emerge from it has got to be the song 'If I were a rich man'.

In the song Tevye, a Jewish milk farmer asks God what would be so wrong with having a small fortune. Tevye laments that there is no shame in being poor, but that there is no great honour in it either. He sings about all the great things he could and would do if he was rich; how he would spend hours reading the Bible, how he would help solve people's problems but most of all how he would be able to get his wife all the things that would make her happy. I must admit that like Tevye I have wondered what it would be like not to want for anything, to be able to buy everything my heart desires and more. In my mind having more money would definitely make me a better person, or would it?

Is money the root of all evil?
In 1 Timothy 6:10 we read "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." This verse is often quoted as "Money is the root of all evil," but the truth is that is not what this verse is saying. Paul is not telling Timothy that money by itself is evil. He is trying to explain to Timothy that the love of money, or in other words lusting after money, is the root of all kinds of evil. Note that money is not the root of all evil, but rather all kinds of evil. Sin and sinful desires are at the root of all evil, not money.1

The Message Bible says it so eloquently when it translates 1 Timothy 6:10 as follows: "Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after."

So Paul is trying to teach Timothy that when you put money first, when the choices that you make are solely governed by money or made to get more money and possessions, that you open yourself up to all sorts of problems. So that is good news, right? You can be as rich as you want to be so long as you don't lust after money. That sounds easy enough. After all people like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, King David and King Solomon were all rich men, and God blessed them tremendously. If they can do it so can I.

Hold your horses
Before we get too excited it will help to get the rest of the context of the letter Paul wrote to Timothy. You see Timothy was a young pastor who was looking after a very challenging church in Ephesus. Not only were there problems with doctrinal issues and questions regarding the role of women in ministry in a very patriarchal society, but there were some people in the church in Ephesus who were more interested in the financial gain they could get from their ministries, than doing God's work. These people were putting money and financial gain before relationships.

Paul wanted Timothy to focus on living life from the right perspective. He wanted Timothy to realise that striving towards earthly riches was far less important that striving toward Godliness and contentment. Paul tells, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."2

So although there is nothing wrong with money in itself, chasing after it will result in temptation. It is this temptation that causes harmful desires. I know of people who have made unethical and downright dishonest decisions because they valued money above their integrity. They were dishonest and then justified their dishonesty by saying that they would lose too much money if they did the right thing.

What does Jesus say about money?
I find it fascinating that there are churches that preach that God wants nothing more for you than to be rich, even though when we look at the life of Jesus and all the Apostles, none of them were wealthy by any means. In fact Jesus tells about money thus: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."3

Remember the rich young man in who asked Jesus what he needed to do to get eternal life? Jesus replied that he had to keep the commandments. The young man replied that he had kept all the commandments. Jesus then replies "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for the rich to enter the

Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.”
Why then is it so hard for the rich to enter the Kingdom of heaven? My theory is that when you have so much, you don’t need to rely on God for anything. You think you don’t need faith if you have a medical aid that will cover your medical expenses, if you have more than enough money for food and clothing and if you can buy whatever you need whenever you want it. I read an article once that talked about church attendance in America after the September 11, 2001 Twin Tower bombings in New York. The article spoke about how full the churches were. I reckon it was because people were scared. All of a sudden they needed God. But as soon as the danger seemed to have disappeared, so did their church attendance.

Let’s summarize: In the story ‘The Fiddler on the Roof’ Tevye is approached by the village matchmaker who tells him that the rich village butcher (who is older than Tevye) wants to marry Tevye’s oldest daughter. Tevye agrees to the marriage thinking that if his daughter was wealthy she would be happy and taken care of. When his daughter finds out she is devastated and asks Tevye not to let the marriage go ahead because she is in love with the poor tailor. This situation creates all sorts of trouble.

Tevye has to make a decision between having his daughter marry someone she loves who is poor, or force her into a loveless marriage with someone who is wealthy. He finally chooses the happiness of his daughter over wealth. Tevye realises that wealth does not necessarily equate with happiness and avoids the trap that money can set for us.

In the final analysis money is not evil. It is when we desire money more than anything else that we fall prey to its trap. Like Timothy our goal should be to strive for righteousness and not riches. If we strive for Godliness and contentment we will be truly wealthy. In the Words of Epictetus a Greek philosopher: “Wealth consists not in having great possessions, but in having few wants.”

1. James 1:13–15
2. 1 Timothy 6:6–9
3. Mathew 6:24
Perhaps you have heard of Aesop’s Fables. Aesop was either an Ethiopian or a Greek who lived about 620 to 560 BC. He was believed to be a slave. Many of his fables were used to teach morals. One fable appears in several versions, but a simplified version goes something like this:

Two neighbors, Avaricious and Envious, prayed to Jupiter (a chief Roman god) to give them their desires. One man was full of avarice, the other full of envy. Jupiter, deciding to punish them, granted that each could have what he wished for, but his neighbor would get twice as much.

Envious wished for a mansion, and got one. But Avaricious received a castle and then asked for 50 cattle. He received 50 cattle, but Envious received 100 cattle. Envious then wished for a room full of gold, and his wish was granted. But he was grieved to learn his neighbor had received two rooms full of gold. When it was his turn to ask something of Jupiter he wished that one of his eyes be put out, thus making Avaricious totally blind and unable to enjoy his gold.

The danger of greed
Obviously Aesop presented an extreme example of greed, far beyond what any of us are likely to fall into. However, Jesus did warn a crowd of thousands of the dangers of greed:

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”¹ He was speaking of an excessive desire to acquire power or wealth beyond what one deserves or needs. We may also refer to greed as covetousness, defined as “wanting more of what you already have enough of.”

As Jesus’ followers, we should heed Jesus’ words. We too can compare our possessions or status in life with others and wish we had as much or more than they do, or we may feel superior if we have more. This in turn can make us bitter or pridelful, and hinder our spiritual growth.

The quest for more and more can cause us to spend so much time and effort acquiring money or possessions that we neglect our family or Christian obligations.

Paul wrote this caution to Timothy: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”²

A Godly perspective
Our loving God desires the best for us. It is not wrong to be wealthy and enjoy a comfortable life. Nor is it wrong to store up for emergencies. In fact it is wise to do so. One of Solomon’s proverbs speaks of the ant that wisely prepares for winter by storing food in summer.³

Agur, who authored some of the Proverbs, presented a balanced approach when he wrote: “Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”⁴

Jesus promises to give us enough when we get our priorities straight.

After discussing needless worry about the necessities of life, Jesus commented, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”⁵

The Apostle Paul experienced many hardships including imprisonment, shipwreck, and beatings, yet he said he learned to be content whatever the circumstances.⁶

Most of us are blessed with more than we need. Let’s be thankful, and learn to share with others. Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”⁷ “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”⁸

A little poem says it well. “There was a man, they called him mad. The more he gave, the more he had.”

I have found this has been true in my own life and the lives of many others.
Fluttering butterflies chasing each other in circles is always a source of delight! As these quivering petals claim the whole dance floor of space before us, their playful antics evoke in us the joy of freedom. Perhaps, this is their celebration dance of new life, as their long dark life in the chrysalis is now behind them.

God, through Jesus Christ, has invited us to join in the Great Dance of life too! The Holy Spirit given us at baptism is our Entry Pass. When we trust and accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour from our long dark life of sin, we're given entry into the kingdom life of the Light. We're in! Our continual trusting and accepting God’s genuine love for us will enable us to know who He is, and to know Him more. In effect, God is telling us, “I already know you through and through. Now I want you to know Me”—by relating to Him as our heavenly Papa who protects and provides for us, as the Lover of our soul who is faithful and cherishes us. For us, this “getting-to-know-You” part is real living! Through Christ, this is living the eternal (though not immortal) life now!  

1 Dr John Stott, one of the world’s most respected Bible teachers, teaches that freedom to live this life now is one of the outstanding features of this new life in Christ. 2

Our Christian freedom begins with lifting of the burden of having to secure our salvation by obedience to the law. 3 One of the chief privileges of this freedom is that guilt from a guilty conscience has no hold on us anymore. In its place, we now have the unspeakable joy of forgiveness, acceptance and access to God, through the Holy Spirit in us. 4

Having said that, we must be reminded that our Christian freedom is not an absolute licence from all boundaries and restrictions. We can’t use this new freedom to support our old sinful self-centred way of life. Authentic Christian freedom and suffocating self-centredness are diametrically opposite.

Left to ourselves, we naturally gravitate towards indulging our human desires, which unfortunately are character flaws—lust and greed for power and for pleasure. Starting as sinful practices they become our habits, then our choices and finally our character traits. 

Dr John Stott opines, "...today the pursuit of money, fame and influence is a concealed drive for power." It permeates the secular and religious life, and churches are not immune! Of course, the call to satisfy our pleasure-fix is ever present—through entertainment, food, drugs and sex. Only when we’re empowered by the Holy Spirit can we freely choose to restrain ourselves from acting sinfully. How? This is done when, through God’s help, we “bring every thought and everything under His control” 5—bit by bit, day by day.

That is good news! The Holy Spirit in us sets us free from this self-centred life to pursue a God-centred life. This new life weighs issues and situations by God’s values, and their importance is determined by where they fit into God’s purpose for us. For example, the significance of health and wealth in this life is radically different in each of these two lifestyles. Things we used to crave for—possessions, acceptance and admiration from peers—have now lost their grip on us. We’re set free from “the dark little dungeon of our own ego” (Malcolm Muggeridge) and can now spend our life energy on things that really matter. 6

This is how to love ourselves. Our Christian freedom frees us to serve the needy and vulnerable people around us. We once might use every opportunity to turn things to our benefit; now we’re enabled to work for the benefit of other people—without any ulterior motive. It’s just an outflow of life-giving Love from within us, and we make no effort to claim credit because it’s God doing it, not us. Participating in this new life is reward enough!

Really, when we can freely choose to love ourselves and others in these ways, aren’t we in effect fulfilling the law? 7 About 2,000 years ago, Jesus said He had come to fulfil the Law; 8 and through us now, He still is! So, the next time a flitting butterfly crosses our path, let’s be reminded that we’re now given the freedom of conscience and the freedom of action. We are free to live life now!
What is reality

Recently my family and I visited a trick eye museum in a neighbouring country. Basically a trick eye museum uses props cleverly arranged and drawings on the walls and the floor to create a 3D image. When a photograph is taken, it gives the impression of something that is not true. For example, when we look at the picture, it may show someone falling or performing an incredible feat but it is just an illusion. A person who has been in the museum will know that what we see in the photo is not the reality of the situation. Our eyes have been tricked.

A person who is ‘high’ on drugs will see reality very different from a normal person. He or she sees or feels things that do not exist. His perception of reality is distorted. Similarly a mental patient may also ‘hear’ voices that are not there. His reality is warped.

So, what is reality? Science teaches us that reality is what we experience through our five senses. Whatever that we cannot see, hear, smell, taste or feel is not real. Or is it? What is ‘real’ reality?

Of course, whatever we ‘sense’ in our everyday lives are a part of reality. But it is not the whole reality. It is not complete reality.

There is a whole reality out there that many people are not aware of. It is the spiritual reality. It cannot be accessed through the physical senses. It can only be experienced through the spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Many people do not believe in the existence of a heaven for the simple reason that it cannot be found or discovered. But the apostle John, taken by vision, pictured heaven in indescribable terms that we can only imagine.¹

Another example is found in the story of the prophet Elisha and his servant.² The servant could only see the chariots and horses. But the reality is there is an even bigger spiritual army protecting Elisha and his servant. The physical army is real enough but does not make up the total reality.

While the physical reality is always changing, it is important for Christians to always remember and be reminded every now and then of some of the fundamental spiritual realities.

God loves us³

This is the most important reality for Christians. God created us out of his love, his nature. He came to die for us so that we can experience the love that he has for us. We do not even understand the depth of his love for us! God is always with us, whether in times of blessings enjoyed with others or in times of sadness when we suffer alone. The circumstances may make us feel otherwise but the reality is God is always there for us. Nothing can happen to us without his knowledge and all that befalls us will eventually work out for our good.

We have been saved⁴

Scriptures clearly states that Christ died for all mankind and forgiven all their sins regardless of whether they accept him as their savior. That is the reality. Our belief in Christ and accompanying repentance just confirms that reality. Christ’s blood justifies us and gives us his righteousness. God ignites us with his Holy Spirit and assures our eternal life with him. Nothing can separate us from his love. We may be persecuted or even martyred but we will not be defeated because Christ has already saved us.

Thousands of Christians have been killed in the Middle East and in Africa in recent years. It may look like the enemies of Christianity are triumphing. The reality on the ground is indeed bleak and scary at times. It appears that Christianity may be purged from its place of origin. But the greater reality is that God’s will will stand. Those who died for Christ had not died in vain. They are safe and secure in Christ.

We will be rewarded⁵

Suffering is real and the pain and hurt that accompanies suffering is not something to gloss over. Some have suffered in silence for years and maybe even decades. For some, like those afflicted with incurable sickness or refugees in camps, there may be no end to the suffering in this life. Down through history, many Christians have suffered for their beliefs. Is this the reality for them; pain and sorrow? Once again we must look at the bigger picture when we suffer. The truth is no suffering for Christ goes unnoticed. Everything will be restored by God in his love and mercy. Christians will receive the gift of eternal life. They will share in the love and joy of the triune God. That is the true reality.

As we continue in our Christian walk, many conditions and situations will confront us. Some of these may be frightening. Some may be threatening. However let us always remember this. What we go through in this life is not the complete reality. Thank God for that.

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¹ Revelation 4
² 2 Kings 6:15–17
³ John 3:16; Ephesians 3:18,19; 2 Thessalonians 2:16; 1 John 4:16
⁴ Romans 5:10; 8:24; Ephesians 2:8,9
⁵ Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:35; Colossians 3:23,24; 2 John 8
A young award-winning chef who worked for a five-star hotel group in India once went back home to visit his parents in his hometown before setting off to Switzerland to start on a prestigious job there. At his hometown he saw a very old man starving along the road and the sight so shocked him that he ran to a nearby restaurant and bought food for the man. The young chef Narayanan Krishnan, watched the old man devour the simple meal. He said “Believe me; I had never seen a person eating so fast, ever. As he ate the food his eyes were filled with tears. Those were the tears of happiness.”

Narayanan abandoned his ambition much to the chagrin of his parents who were really keen to see their son succeed in life. He founded the Akshaya Trust organization in 2003 and began to feed the homeless and mentally disabled in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. He serves breakfast, lunch and dinner to hundreds of elderly people whom no one cares for. Besides that this remarkable man even provides haircuts and shaves to the people he served. He decided to provide dignity to the homeless as well. Narayanan’s day starts early at 4 a.m. He and his team begin covering nearly 125 miles using a donated van. He looks for the destitute that are sheltering under bridges or in the nooks and crannies of buildings and feeds them. Narayanan himself sleeps in his modest kitchen with his co-workers having invested his entire savings towards his cause. He has no interest for luxury and says “I see the soul. I want to save my people.”

Today millions of suffering people live in unimaginable deplorable conditions throughout the world. Wars and brutality have caused millions to flee their homelands. Natural disasters have taken away everything from people who have become their victims. Poverty has overwhelmed countless. We have all seen television images of those who live in squalid conditions in nations that seem to prefer spending money acquiring military weapons. People are living in a world that offers no hope to the suffering. However, when all seems lost those few who care like Narayanan Krishnan offer a glimpse of hope that people can cling on to. Today, more than at any other time, hope is what the world needs. The world cannot and must not continue this way. Are humans created to be born into misery? Are people born to starve and die in disease and squalor? Are people alive just to be murdered in wars? Surely this is not why we were born. However, the reality of life here on Earth is the suffering we see everyday with only the fortunate few who experience peace and a reasonably good life. But there is hope for every human being on Earth. It is the divine hope that we receive as a gift. It is the gift of Christ. 1 Peter 1: 3–7 reveals “All honor to God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; for it is his boundless mercy that has given us the privilege of being born again so that we are now members of God’s own family. Now we live in the hope of eternal life because Christ rose again from the dead. And God has reserved for his children the priceless gift of eternal life; it is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And God, in his mighty power, will make sure that you get there safely to receive it because you are trusting him. It will be yours in that coming last day for all to see. So be truly glad! There is wonderful joy ahead, even though the going is rough for a while down here.”

The Eternal God knows the suffering that is here on Earth. It is the suffering brought on by our own human choices and follies. Despite the way humans have chosen to go, God would not allow mankind to suffer forever. In fact his love for us is so great that he sent his Son who was the Word existing for eternity with him, to become a human being and live among us. His Son Jesus Christ was God incarnate who came to save all mankind from the consequences of human sin. He gave his life as a sacrifice to atone for our sins and thereby giving us the one real hope for freedom from all suffering. Through his resurrection he gave us the gift of eternal life. Just as the abandoned poor cling to Narayanan who gives them hope, we can cling to Jesus Christ for the hope of an end to all human suffering. What we frail human beings cannot do, God almighty has accomplished through Jesus Christ. Even in the face of death we have a living hope. It is not just a wish or a fantasy desire. It is the sure expectation based on the word of Christ himself. Since God cannot lie, our hope is not in vain. This hope is the gift of God for you and me. Hold fast to it.  }

1 John 3:16  
2 John 11:25  
3 Titus 1:2  

April–June 2015
Speaking of life...

Would have been enough

In the USA, we have just celebrated the holiday of Thanksgiving. The traditions observed on Thanksgiving don’t have associations with the bible or Christianity, but “giving thanks” is most certainly a biblical idea. In fact most Christians, whether or not they live in America, celebrate a form of “thanksgiving” more often than they realize.

A Christian celebration that most of us are familiar with is Communion or the Lord’s Supper. Some churches call this “The Eucharist,” which comes from the Greek word eucharistia, meaning—you guessed it—“thanksgiving.” So wherever and whoever we are, when we take the symbols of the blood and body of Jesus, we are truly giving thanks and celebrating our life in Christ.

Israel are not part of our modern history, but they do give us a wonderful reminder of God’s saving actions in our lives today. Just as God saved Israel in the parting of the Red Sea, he has saved us from drowning in sinfulness. Just as he gave Israel the Sabbath, he has given us rest in a new life in Christ. And just as he completed the temple by taking up residence in it, he now lives in us. We too can say, “If he had only given us one of these blessings, it would have been enough.”

Our national day of Thanksgiving is a good time for us to stop and think about how often we should say “Dayenu” when we think of what God has done for us. Jesus went to the Cross, where he was crucified, died, and buried. But, he then rose from the grave, defeating death—inviting us to follow and do the same. He ascended to the Father and is taking us with him.

And God continues to do more! It did not stop with the Incarnation of Jesus, or the miracles Jesus performed while on Earth. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God did not just do what needed to be done for us, he continues to do all that can possibly be done to secure our salvation.

I believe God is always moving and moves beyond our imaginations. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, God does “more than we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). So just as Israel sang a rising crescendo of thanksgiving with “Dayenu”, let gratitude be our crescendo for the one who is worthy of our praise.
I was recently asked to be one of several guest speakers at a women’s conference in South Africa. It was clear that a lot of planning, preparation and prayer went into the presentations. Some were polished, some were full of humor, some were thought-provoking, some were all of the above. All of us who spoke wanted God to speak through us.

One speaker mentioned Elijah’s experience with God on Mount Horeb, and how God was not in the powerful wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire, but instead God was in the small still voice. Another speaker discussed the topic of listening for God in the silence.

Interestingly, that is what happened at the conference. We guest speakers were polished, prepared and politic in our presentations. Some of us shouted, some quoted Scripture, some leaped or otherwise put on an impressive performance. But did the weight of our quoting Scripture generate the wind in which we would find God? Did the leaping antics and mimicry create the earthquake that would shake us to our foundations?

I’m not saying God was not in those things, but for me the voice of God was in the still small voice of one woman who stood up unprepared and spoke from her heart to the hearts of everyone there.

This woman was from Zimbabwe. She, along with seven other women from Zimbabwe, had traveled long and hard by bus, even crossing national borders, to join the conference. When asked about how our brothers and sisters in Zimbabwe were faring in the midst of the turmoil that has gripped that country, she smiled and said, “I don’t think the church in Zimbabwe has ever been so strong.”

The still small voice of faith!

She then proceeded to tell us about the blessings that God has showered upon the church there: people helping one another out in times of crisis; needs being met through unexpected circumstances; members and congregations seeking ways and means to do mission outreach; spiritual growth in times of physical dearth.

But for me the most inspiring and humbling feature was that before she even began to speak, she asked us to join her in prayer. The first thing she did, before sharing what was happening in her country, was to offer her thanks and praise to God. When she finished telling us of the events happening in the churches in Zimbabwe, she offered up praise to our Lord for his abundant mercy once again. Her first and last thought in talking about the plight of our Zimbabwean brothers and sisters was in looking to the things that are above.

Her view of the Zimbabwean churches’ situation wasn’t the severe food shortages or the astronomical inflation that has made money virtually meaningless, nor the infrastructure that is scarcely recognizable as a structure. Instead her view was on the blessings that God has bestowed on them through spiritual growth and of individuals stepping up to shoulder the job of feeding the sheep.

She spoke with excitement of the baptism in one day of 60 people—people who had walked miles to a river to be baptized. She told how the women’s ministry in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi will be celebrating their tenth annual retreat next year. That’s stepping out in faith.

Despite all the polished, well-prepared presentations, the real highlight of the conference was the message of positives in the face of a mountain of negatives brought by the ladies from Zimbabwe. In their “still, small voice” they modeled hope and faith and enthusiasm for us all.
1,900 years of revelation

The mark of the beast. Armageddon. The four horsemen. 666. Babylon the great. The seven last plagues. The bottomless pit. The lake of fire. These images of terror and catastrophe from the book of Revelation have greatly influenced the popular psyche. Even the secular press uses images such as “armageddon” and “four horsemen of the apocalypse” to describe calamities in our world.

Misunderstood book

Despite almost 1,900 years of fascination with the book of Revelation—A.D. 96 is often suggested as a date for the book—John’s letter to the churches in his care continues to be misunderstood. And badly misinterpreted.

One popular misconception is that Revelation has nothing of importance to say to us. It’s considered to be merely a bizarre piece of first-century writing with no relevance for today. Another wrong idea is that Revelation is a codebook describing a specific outline of history written in advance. Countless interpreters have tried to “decode” the book as a handbook for predicting the end of the world.

This is not new. About the middle of the second century, a newly baptized Christian named Montanus claimed to have charismatic gifts. He taught that the church had entered the final age. Montanus and his followers predicted that the end of the world was near. The new Jerusalem was about to descend upon the nearby village of Pepuza, in what is now Turkey.

Montanus and his followers drew support for such ideas in large part from the book of Revelation. Montanus’ influence spread rapidly and widely among Christians throughout the Roman world. But the prophecy of Montanus failed. By misinterpreting Revelation, he tarnished the book’s reputation to the point that some Christians thought it shouldn’t be in the Bible.

The claims of Christian groups from Montanus to the present—that Revelation pinpoints the events, personalities and time period of “the end”—have all failed. This should be a caution for Christians against using the book of Revelation as a predictive handbook.

For the church

We miss a lot by not reading carefully the first chapter of this magnificent vision. It is a message from Jesus Christ to his apostle John to pass on to seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revel. 1:11). Many people forget that Revelation is written by a church pastor to his churches—to Christians, to those who believe in and accept Jesus Christ and to those who are suffering because of their faith. John is their companion in suffering. Revelation had life-and-death meaning for its first hearers because it was written specifically to them. It addressed John’s brothers and sisters about dire problems. Some were being persecuted, tortured and even beheaded, as clearly indicated in Revelation 20:4. These believers needed to be reminded that ultimate victory in this world belongs to those who pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ, not the emperor in Rome.

So Revelation is written to Christians who live in an often brutal world. In that sense, its message applies to all of us. Essentially, Revelation says we must overcome the world rather than allow it to overcome us.2

By using seven church congregations—the number seven often depicted completion to the ancients—John suggests that the spiritual problems and emergencies facing these churches were to be considered representative of Christians throughout the Roman Empire. And by extension, these problems can be seen as threats that Christians in all places and ages must confront.

An urgent appeal

The message to the churches was simple but urgent. Christians in Asia were being challenged to walk through life as witnesses to the truth, even to the point of death. The church members, though, were experiencing their own internal crises, as chapters 2 and 3 make clear. Internal problems besetting the seven churches paralleled the spiritual state of a world in the grip of evil.

John’s vision illustrates the consequences of the world’s spiritual failing, through judgments such as the seven last plagues. But Christians warned about these judgments as well.3 Revelation tells the church how to escape God’s judgment on the world. The church must be in the world and deal with it, but it must not be of the world.

The message of Revelation is that the church must clean up its own spiritual house. Do something about its weak spiritual state and take a stand against state persecution. The church must confront the evil in the world pictured by the beast and Babylon. When the church successfully resists the world’s evil allure (and the devil behind it), it witnesses to the truth that God exists and that he rules over all.

One of the earliest Christian confessions of faith was, “Jesus is Lord.”4 Revelation was written to bolster that conviction. It pointed in visionary and symbolic language to the “unseen hand” of God. It is God, the book insists, who decides the fate of nations and history. The beast and Babylon attain significance only as opponents of what Jesus Christ is doing. History revolves around him, not the woman who rides the continued on page 23
Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other.

**Philip Yancey**

Only Jesus would be crazy enough to suggest that if you want to become the greatest, you should become the least. Only Jesus would declare God’s blessing on the poor rather than on the rich and would insist that it’s not enough to just love your friends. I just began to wonder if anybody still believed Jesus meant those things he said.

**Shane Claiborne**

Success comes in a lot of ways, but it doesn’t come with money and it doesn’t come with fame. It comes from having a meaning in your life, doing what you love and being passionate about what you do. That’s having a life of success. When you have the ability to do what you love, love what you do and have the ability to impact people. That’s having a life of success. That’s what having a life of meaning is.

**Tim Tebow**

Worry implies that we don’t quite trust God is big enough, powerful enough, or loving enough to take care of what’s happening in our lives.

The irony is that while God doesn’t need us but still wants us, we desperately need God but don’t really want Him most of the time.

**Francis Chan**

God works powerfully, but for the most part gently and gradually.

**John Newton**

You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.

**Anne Lamott**

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.

**G.K. Chesterton**

Nobody’s perfect. Well, there was this one guy, but we killed him...

**Christopher Moore**

God never hurries. There are no deadlines against which he must work. Only to know this is to quiet our spirits and relax our nerves. Jesus calls us to his rest, and meekness is His method. The meek man cares not at all who is greater than he, for he has long ago decided that the esteem of the world is not worth the effort.

**A.W. Tozer**

God wants us to know we are saved, for saved people are dangerous people, willing to face off with the world, unafraid of the consequences since they know that, whatever happens, they will have eternal life.

**Max Lucado**

We are settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.

**David Platt**

When you are down to nothing, God is up to something. It is up to you to reach out to find what God is up to for you.

**Robert Schuler**

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**Shane Claiborne**

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**Shane Claiborne**

When John was inspired to depict the future judgment of the beast and the tormentors of the church, it was his way of saying: God is in charge.

Jesus Christ rules his presence to bear on the world. This world of politics and powers is only a stage for the acting out of God’s work of redemption.

Revelation’s symbolic portrayal of judgment on the world is meant to be a word to the wise as well as a tremendous encouragement. The daily struggles and setbacks of Christians, their battles with faith and temptations to despair—all of this must be understood in terms of the cosmic conflict being fought in the heavenly realm.

**Calling all Christians**

Revelation answers the question: Who is Lord? The churches John wrote to suffered under evil rulers and from their own human failings. The wicked seemed to flourish. Why? Where was God and why hadn’t he rescued his people? Why be a Christian in such a world?

These are the uncertainties Revelation deals with. They are issues we wonder about as well. Revelation answers these questions for us today as it did for the church in the first century. The book insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, God rules. He will ultimately end the evil that seems to hold sway in our world. The church is to stay focused on the almighty God, who is the ruler of the universe, and to the Lamb, who has saved them.

The church may seem powerless on earth—and it is, of itself. But the slain Jesus was glorified, and is at the right hand of the Father, controlling the world’s destiny. This Christ is not only Lord of the world but also Lord and Savior of the church.

Faith in God’s sovereignty over all things—including evil—is the decisive theme and emphasis of Revelation. After 1,900 years, it is still ahead of its time.

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1 Revelation 1:10–11
2 Revelation 3:21
3 Revelation 18:4–5
4 Romans 10:9
5 Revelation 2:12–13
6 Revelation 3:17

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Hmm...
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